

# Givings and misgivings

MICHAEL LEUNIG

*December 18, 2009*

There comes a time in December when the only Christmas trees that remain for sale in front of fruit shops are the scrappiest of the scrappy. The big juicy trees have all been sold to the early birds, leaving just the scrubbers for the weary working parents who are running late with life. As with all things Christmas, what is available will have to suffice: the feeble turkey, the last unsatisfactory box of handkerchiefs in the gift shop, the manger in the stable.

The unfortunate conifer is bundled home where, with some difficulty, it is stood up in a four-gallon drum or bucket, or whatever else can be scrounged. Some sort of star is then affixed to the drooping tip and its rapidly dehydrating branches are hung with tinsel and fragile glass baubles. Electrical wires may also be attached so that everything lights up and pulses like a sad casino. In the corner of the room, perhaps next to the television, the pitiful young *Pinus radiata* now stands as a symbol of life and renewal but, alas, is also a picture of death and humiliation. The little family are well pleased with the decorations and gather around admiring their captive tree: the wilting botanical corpse that will never rise to spread its arms in a forest and bring oxygen to the world. Who needs trees — the family is together, the saviour has been born and Santa is on his way!

Such a bleak interpretation, yet I remember in childhood sometimes feeling a small murmur of sorrow for the Christmas tree and its sad fate. In spite of all my excitement about its promise and the fragrant mystique, it seemed such a waste of a precious life to a boy growing up in a tree-poor industrial landscape.

Christmas trees are different now. Like so many wonders of the modern world, they have to be better than ever. Great advances have been made. Today's trees are juicy specimens and they look almost edible — dense, well formed and as plump as a Christmas goose. Produced in special farms, they are treated with growth stimulants and chemical fertilisers and cleverly pruned to create an abundance of foliage and big price tags.

Yet these trees seem somehow overblown and unnatural. There is something gross and unreal about them. They are much like the politicians, celebrities and cakes of the modern era. These are not the trees of Christmases past — dragged home wabi-sabi from the fruit shop or hastily nicked by dad from the roadside near the pine plantation — these are award-winning trees of excellence. They speak not of new life but of aspiration.

All of that's OK if you like that sort of thing, but if one yearns for the humble, the simple and the natural (the very gifts that the three wise men would surely offer in these times) then perhaps a small pilgrimage to a living tree could somehow suffice. A respectful touch of tinsel or a cardboard star would not be out of the question.

*I think that I shall never see*

*A poem lovely as a tree.*

*But since they take so long to grow,*

*Shade cloth seems the way to go.*

I apologise to Joyce Kilmer for what I have done with the opening lines of his famous poem *Trees* — but there are extenuating circumstances. Kilmer's poem in praise of trees has been much treasured and much derided. Some say it's bad poetry, but Kilmer never lived to know about this love and mockery surrounding his creation. As an American soldier he was killed amid the shattered trees of France in World War I just a few years after writing it. It's the sort of poem that men and women might read to their grandchildren — which means that the question of bad poetry is irrelevant. Robert Frost, a poet not famous for bad poetry, came up with the idea that a good poem is one that somehow lodges and is hard to get rid of. Kilmer's "sentimental" offering has lodged, yet it is worth considering that he wrote it to express values, feelings and ideas that he feared had not lodged well enough in humanity's heart.

In Melbourne's Green-voting inner north there stands a newly built wing of a high school; a standout, colourful and curved piece of architecture befitting a model, "forward-moving" government school. Out of curiosity I wandered into this school on open day recently and was fascinated to see how different the new showpiece was to the chicken coops I had attended in the days of my rumble-tumble education. I wandered into a room where a young landscape architect was outlining to visitors the new plans for the schoolyard, so I sat and listened, my ears hungry for descriptions of forthcoming beautiful trees. Government schools can be so horribly and tragically treeless.

I have reason to pass this school fairly frequently and have noticed how hard and hot the sun glares down upon the dusty schoolyard. Except for a magnificent Moreton Bay fig planted by caring souls in bygone days, the school is lacking in useful shade where it matters and this seems a dreadful pity and neglect to me. I listened as the young architect spoke of novel outdoor features to be installed; he mentioned a low hedge of shrubs that would not obscure the eye-catching building and described the shade-cloth structures that would provide relief from the sun — trees being too slow growing to bother about. My heart fell.

I questioned him and attempted a short dissertation about the value of significant trees.

"Would you like to see more trees?" he responded with sudden and genuine concern. My heart rose. A grumpy voice in the audience then pointed out that trees use up too much water. I think humans use up too much water. Another person turned and told me that plantings in the schoolyard were already good enough — thank you very much. My heart sank.

I wandered off down the stairs wondering what is being taught in schools these days and reflected upon David Attenborough's troubled observation that urban humanity is becoming perilously disconnected from nature — and doesn't know it.

Unanswered questions remain; questions about beauty, nature and health, the value of slow growth and patience, the idea that we plant and provide for future generations, of greening the city and that every bit of oxygen and birdsong production matters. There are all these lessons to teach by example and contemplate — but alas, there's no novelty in any of it.

I met a thoughtful and good-humoured woman in Adelaide recently; a pediatric physiotherapist who spends much of her working life crawling on the floor relating to infants who need her help. She told me that her children were attending a particular private school, ". . . not just for the good education, but also for the natural setting of the school grounds". My heart rose.

"So much free space and so many beautiful trees all cared for — it teaches them a lot," she said. "It gives them a lot. It makes children happier and friendlier. It calms and restores them. They have real affection for those trees. What a great influence. It makes paying the fees seem thoroughly worthwhile." My heart lifted even more.

It's true. Children are gentler and wiser in the presence of trees — and grown-up children the same.

We have a lot of naturalisation to do in this land; a lot of restoring and calming, planting and healing. I dream of a national shade trail: a winding path whereon travellers might wander the continent free from the sun's persecution.

There are many suitable varieties of beautiful drought-resistant trees with a quality of shade that is fresh and alive. They are waiting to serve the nation and are ready to offer their poetry. Nothing expresses itself more fully and freely than a tree.

This is a pipe dream. This is a sentimental poem. This can be done.